

Gender Stereotypes: A Tool of Oppression of Women in Sierra Leone Case Study: Freetown

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ABSTRACT

This article delves into the pervasive issue of gender stereotypes and their profound impact on the lives of women. In societies worldwide, deeply ingrained stereotypes continue to shape perceptions, expectations, and opportunities for individuals based on their gender. This research seeks to unravel the multifaceted ways in which these stereotypes oppress women, limiting their personal, social, and professional advancement. This study examines the root causes, socio cultural manifestations, and psychological consequences of gender stereotypes. It explores the perpetuation of gender bias in education, workplace, and daily interactions, shedding light on the mechanisms that sustain these harmful beliefs. Moreover, this research investigates the intersectionality of gender stereotypes, acknowledging the compounded effects on women from diverse ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. Many of the respondents confirmed the theories presented in the literature review; from the sex-based assigned roles and responsibilities, to the burdens of being subjectively characterized. The researcher gained an insight into the troubled world of negatively stereotyped women through the narration of their lives and experiences. The researcher also offers an in-depth analysis of the various strategies employed by women to cope with and overcome these stereotypes through religious, recreational and behavior means, thereby showcasing the resilience and agency of women in the face of adversity. It highlights the importance of allyship and advocacy in dismantling oppressive gender norms.

KEYWORDS: Gender, Gender Stereotypes, oppression, inequality, Gender Schema

ARTICLE DETAILS

Published On:
5 April 2025

Available on:
<https://ijiissh.com/>

1. INTRODUCTION

The awareness of gender stereotypes, especially in recent times have led to multiple researches in finding out which demographic is most predisposed to it. Women and young girls were the most common demographic to face this problem. Gender stereotyping against women has been a pervasive issue in society for decades, affecting how females are perceived, judged, and treated. It is a phenomenon that shapes social interactions, expectations, and attitudes towards women. Gender stereotyping against women is mainly manifested in two forms: prescriptive stereotypes and descriptive stereotypes. Prescriptive stereotypes dictate what women should and should not do according to their gender. These stereotypes prescribe what is acceptable behaviour for women and penalise them if they deviate from the norm. In contrast, descriptive stereotypes describe what people perceive to be female characteristics and attributes, such as nurturing, gentle, and emotional (Eagly & Karau, 2002). These stereotypes limit women's opportunities and restrict their potential by framing their identity around their gender. According to the social role theory, gender stereotypes derive from the discrepant distribution of men and women into social roles both in the home and at work (Eagly, 1987, 1997; Koenig and Eagly, 2014).

Some may agree with the benefits of assigning gender roles, such as helping both genders to recognise their place in society and ensuring the function of society. They can serve as an adaptive function allowing people to categorise and simplify what they observe and to make predictions about others (Devine and Sharp, 2009; Fiske and Taylor 2013). This will suppress human potential and result in depression and low self- esteem. In a study conducted by the Canadian Journal of Psychiatry about Gender- Role Conflict as a psychological risk factor of suicide attempts among adolescent girls, 26.79% of the research sample of girls reported that their suicide attempts were as a result of feeling pressured by traditional expectations of home life. The literature review aims to elucidate and analyse the current state of knowledge regarding gender stereotyping against women in the Regent Road community, examining the types, causes, impacts, and interventions related to this issue. One can say that the origin of gender

stereotyping can be traced back to the colonisation of African countries. The advancement of the Europeans led to the enforcement and hence, the adoption of the Western culture by the indigenous people. Before this time, women were known to hold powerful positions in society; Many matriarchal societies that have existed throughout Africa's history, where women played important roles and maintained social equilibrium. For example, women such as Nyarroh of Bandasuma who ruled as a chief from 1880 to 1914 in what is today known as southern Sierra Leone. There was also Ahebi Ugbabe who ruled a female king in colonial Nigeria (Nwando Achebe, 2011).

1.1 Background to the study

The notion of gender stereotyping has been around for centuries; both men and women have been subjected (consciously and unconsciously), thereby birthing a cycle that has only gained momentum until recent times. By definition, gender stereotyping refers to a generalised view or preconception about attributes or characteristics, or the roles that are ought to be possessed by, or performed by, both men and women (OHCHR). It is widely perceived that men have the obligations of being the sole breadwinners, while maintaining discipline and order in the home; they are assumed to pursue employment in fields such as construction, military, political careers, etc. Women, on the other hand, are perceived to be nurturers and are assumed to be feminine, quiet and soft which is why they are delegated roles as primary caregivers and homemakers instead.

There have been many theories investigating the phenomenon of gender stereotyping: Eagly and Wood's Social Role Theory which propounds that everyday activities performed by men and women are as a result of perceived dispositions of the sexes. The Gender Schema Theory by Bem (1981) postulates that children learn their roles from their culture. The study builds on these theories in exploring the cause and effect of gender stereotyping of women; It poses the question of 'in what ways have women been forced to conform to social roles in an otherwise patriarchal society.

2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Women have been the major recipients of gender stereotyping for centuries; As a result, women have found their personal and professional values hindered by a patriarchal society. Social movements such as the Women's Suffrage of the 18th century, Women's Liberation Movement of the late 1960s and '70s in the United States were successful attempts to alleviate the effects of gender stereotyping. This phenomenon is more popular in third world countries of today's society where traditionalism is the majority's mentality. Sierra Leone, being one such country, has most of its population of women being forced to conform to patriarchal perceptions about their own lives. Furthermore, gender stereotypes compounded and intersecting with other stereotypes have a disproportionate negative impact on certain groups of women, such as women from minority or indigenous groups, women with disabilities, women from lower caste groups or with lower economic status, migrant women, etc. (OHCHR, 2020).

Since before Sierra Leone's Independence in 1961, women have been working without fail in their assigned social roles, which is why they suffered the most during the country's eleven-year civil war. The traditional culture which restricts women from attaining significant leadership roles in society squashes their potentials to society; from being told to dress and behave a certain way to being socially labelled as second to men, these are examples of violation of their human rights which is a form of oppression. The study will expand upon this phenomenon through extensive empirical research as well as seeking ways to eradicate it.

3. 1 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- **To Investigate the Forms of Gender Stereotyping:** Analyze the different types of gender stereotypes (prescriptive and descriptive) faced by women and young girls in Freetown.
- **To Examine the Causes of Gender Stereotyping:** Identify and explore the root causes of gender stereotypes against women, including traditional, religious, socialization, and patriarchal influences.
- **To Assess the Impacts of Gender Stereotyping:** Evaluate how gender stereotypes affect women's personal and professional lives, particularly in terms of educational opportunities, healthcare access, financial independence, and susceptibility to gender-based violence.
- **To Propose Interventions:** Develop recommendations and interventions aimed at mitigating the effects of gender stereotyping against women in the targeted community.

3.2 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- What are the prevalent forms of gender stereotypes experienced by women and young girls in Freetown?
- What are the underlying causes of gender stereotyping against women in Sierra Leone, and how do these causes manifest in contemporary society?
- How do gender stereotypes impact the educational opportunities and professional lives of women in the Regent Road community?
- What strategies can be implemented to challenge and reduce gender stereotypes and their effects on women in the community?

4. ROOT CAUSES OF GENDER STEREOTYPES AGAINST WOMEN

4.1 Tradition

The occurrence of the Sierra Leone Civil War (1991-2002) further aggravated the subjugation of girls and women in the country; they suffered the most during that period (Human Rights Watch, 2003). Statistics pertaining to the numbers of women affected by the conflict in Sierra Leone remain a huge concern. In 2003, Human Rights Watch published a report in which they stated that as many as 275,000 women and girls may have been sexually violated during the war. These actions only served to solidify sexism against women in contemporary Sierra Leone. It is now a thriving tradition that women must be predominantly responsible for the home and child(ren) while men deal with public affairs (Morris, 2014). There is a significant difference in the ratio of housewives to career women in Sierra Leone (Kaba, 2015). This is why domestic violence is perpetuated and men rape their wives because they believe that it is their right as husbands since they have paid the bride price (Bensimon, 2017). Boys are also taught from a young age to internalise such beliefs as it is their right as men. They then go on to impose such beliefs on their female counterparts, resulting in a cycle called tradition (Mikell, 1997).

4.2 Religion

One thing that is common in almost every religion is how women are expected to behave, i.e they must be docile and subservient, living to serve their husbands and other male members of society. While these doctrines aim at maintaining social equilibrium and though they might have worked some thousand years ago, it is common knowledge that they cannot apply in modern times (Kaba, 2015). The patriarchal society in which we live proves this point. Countries such as Indonesia have a large Muslim population where religious restrictions impede women's mobility outside the house and prohibit communication between the sexes (Akter et. al, 2017). Under customary and Muslim law, women are perceived as chattel or children who cannot take decisions by themselves under personal law (CEDAW, State of Party Report, 2012). Accordingly, a dowry is required reinforcing the belief that a wife is the property of her husband and that he has absolute right over her (CEDAW, State of Party Report, 2012).

The Christian religion proposes certain behaviours and expectations of women as well; The Church in itself has been perpetuating the dehumanising and oppression of women for centuries, manipulating the Bible in order to reinforce patriarchy. The Bible verse in Ephesians 5:22 states "Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Saviour." This is what men have used as justification for the centuries of oppression to which they have subjected women.

4.3 Socialisation

Socialisation is another significant factor in creating gender stereotypes, as children are taught and internalise gender roles and expectations from a young age (Bensimon, 2017). As children are very impressionable, they are the most susceptible to the causes and effects of gender stereotypes. Most, if not all, areas of society encompass attributes of gender stereotyping, from children's literature, toys and dressing, and even parenting (Morris, 2014). Young girls have been held to the conventional idea of what a girl should look and act like since conception; baby showers and gender reveal parties for expecting parents almost always have pink colours, dolls and teddy bears. It is obvious as marketing strategies where children are the target also make gender specific products.

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4.4 Patriarchy

The term 'Patriarchy' is used by various sociological theories to describe a system of social relationships, values, norms, and behaviour patterns that are predominantly shaped by men, and which encourage a privileged position for men. Although there is nothing wrong with the system being set up for the progression of men, it gives them the power status in society which means it inherently leads to valuing masculinity over femininity. Power status is an important construct to be examined because there is evidence to support that having higher power status leads people to display more discriminatory behaviours (Sachdev & Bourhis, 1985). The desire to maintain this power status given to men has resulted in the oppression of women through fear and control. Patriarchy, which is the systematic oppression of women by men, enforces gender norms and perpetuates sexism, leading to gender roles becoming deeply ingrained in society (Connell, 2005).

It is now made worse in contemporary Sierra Leone where economic instability is prevalent such that the power struggle among men themselves results in the suppression of women in various aspects of society. This misogynistic transformation of patriarchy is why male dominance has become a universal belief where women are seen as lesser and weaker beings, valued only by their body parts.

5.0 FORMS OF GENDER STEREOTYPE

In Freetown, Sierra Leone, women and young girls encounter various gender stereotypes that impede their social, educational, and economic advancement. A predominant stereotype is the expectation that women should primarily engage in domestic roles, such as cooking, cleaning, and childcare. This belief often restricts their access to education and professional growth, reinforcing traditional gender norms that confine women to household duties. Studies indicate that these societal expectations contribute to girls bearing heavier domestic workloads, thereby diminishing their academic focus and reinforcing gender stereotypes within educational settings (Matemu, 2023).

Another prevailing stereotype is the perception that men are more suited for leadership and decision-making roles, both in public and private spheres. This bias results in the underrepresentation of women in political and business leadership positions, perpetuating the notion that women are less capable of handling responsibilities outside the domestic domain. Such stereotypes are deeply ingrained in societal norms, making it challenging for women to assert themselves in roles traditionally dominated by men (M'Cormack-Hale & Twum, 2022).

Educational disparities further exacerbate these stereotypes. Girls in Sierra Leone are less likely to remain in school compared to boys due to factors such as child marriage, early pregnancy, and societal expectations that prioritize domestic responsibilities over education for females. This educational gap reinforces the stereotype that women are less competent or less deserving of professional opportunities, thereby limiting their participation in various sectors (Matemu, 2023).

Gender-based violence (GBV) is another critical issue rooted in harmful stereotypes. Societal norms often justify certain types of violence in relationships as acceptable, and women who report such cases may face judgment and shame from the community. This perpetuates the stereotype that women should be submissive and tolerate abuse, further entrenching gender inequality (M'Cormack-Hale & Twum, 2022).

Female genital mutilation (FGM) is a severe manifestation of gender stereotypes that view women's sexuality as something to be controlled. Sierra Leone has one of the highest rates of FGM globally, with 90% of girls and women aged 15 to 49 undergoing the procedure. This practice is deeply rooted in cultural norms that aim to suppress women's sexual autonomy, reflecting a broader stereotype that women's bodies should be regulated to maintain societal notions of purity and honor (The Guardian, 2024).

In the educational sector, social norms significantly impact girls' educational opportunities. Perceptions around gender roles and the value of girls' education often keep them from claiming their rights and reaching their full potential. Research indicates that these harmful social norms are at the root of girls' low educational attainment, as societal expectations prioritize domestic roles over academic achievement for girls (Matemu, 2023).

The challenges faced by women in Sierra Leone are multifaceted, encompassing gender-based violence, discrimination, and harmful traditional practices like FGM. Despite their significant contributions to the economy and household sustenance, women continue to face marginalization due to entrenched gender stereotypes that limit their visibility, participation, and representation in various sectors (M'Cormack-Hale & Twum, 2022).

Efforts to address these stereotypes include community-based initiatives aimed at shifting harmful perceptions around gender roles and promoting respect for girls' education. Recommendations include implementing localized community dialogues, providing quality teacher training to address gender norms in the classroom, and increasing access to female role models. These strategies aim to transform social norms and help girls and boys fulfill their potential (Matemu, 2023).

However, progress in combating these stereotypes is often slow due to deeply entrenched cultural norms. For instance, the practice of FGM persists despite awareness campaigns, as it is upheld by traditional beliefs and societal pressures. This underscores the need for continuous and culturally sensitive efforts to challenge and change these harmful stereotypes (The Guardian, 2024).

In conclusion, women and young girls in Freetown face a range of gender stereotypes that limit their opportunities and perpetuate inequality. Addressing these issues requires a multifaceted approach that includes education, community engagement, legal reforms, and the promotion of positive role models to transform societal perceptions and empower women and girls.

6. IMPLICATIONS OF GENDER STEREOTYPES ON WOMEN

6.1 Educational Inequalities

Education is an essential factor in the progression of any individual throughout society. It serves as a safety net in which one can earn a livelihood and access greater opportunities. Unfortunately, the difference between literate and illiterate people in the country has widened alarmingly since its independence and a great number of the illiterate population are represented by women. According to the World Bank Group Gender Data Portal reported that in 2021, 'Adult literacy in Sierra Leone is lower among women (40.1%) than among men (55.3%)'. This inequality originates from the primary level and worsens toward the secondary and

tertiary; This is because young girls, especially in the rural areas are encouraged to focus more on trading and business than education. Even girls who do get a basic primary education rarely make it past that stage. According to the United Nations Girls Education Initiative, in Sierra Leone, only 9.5% of women have achieved Secondary and Tertiary level education.

6.2 High Mortality Owing to Insufficient Access to Proper Healthcare

Timely access to good-quality, affordable healthcare (both preventive and curative) plays a critical role in maintaining good health. It is considered an important social determinant of health (WHO, 2019). Access to proper healthcare is a human right in all states and communities; It is through proper healthcare that one can hope to overcome various ailments and live to see another day. Gender equality is almost non-existent in healthcare throughout the globe; It is safe to say that most women do not have this luxury as there are increasing mortality rates for girls and women every day. Women are denied basic healthcare services from dealing with menstruation to pregnancy, up to old age. The distribution of healthcare to women is influenced by geographic and socioeconomic factors, however, they still find it difficult to receive unbiased and proper treatment. Gender inequality in healthcare is also evident in the fact that diseases affecting women are less studied as compared to diseases affecting men (United Nations, 2020). Since women require more attention and care in health issues, the delay in receiving proper health care can result in long-term and often fatal health consequences. A survey conducted in early 2019 in the U.S found that one in five women feel their doctor has ignored or dismissed their symptoms, and 17% say they feel they have been treated differently because of their gender. Doctors also tend to misdiagnose serious health concerns in women than men.

6.3 Financial Insecurity

One of the leading factors responsible for the oppression of women is the lack of access to financial aid and opportunities that secures independence. The majority of the world's population of women are denied proper facilities - such as well-paying jobs, access to land resources - which would ensure an appropriate standard of living. According to the Atlantic Press report in 2019, many types of research support that finding a job is much more challenging for women than it is for men and when women are employed, they tend to work in low-quality jobs in vulnerable conditions. There are various factors which also have negative effects on the career development of women, and it is imperative that they are examined. First studies show that differences in physical appearance of men and women result in perceptions of personal traits associated with each sex (Friedman et. al, 1992). Second, the sex composition of a workplace and its organisational policies (particularly male- dominated workplaces and policies that tolerate discriminatory behaviours) contributes to gender discrimination (Bobbitt-Zeher, 2011). Third, fear of threat to male status and power as well as the urge to avoid negative reactions to non-traditional roles contribute to the endorsement of sexism (Glick & Fiske, 2001).

In Sierra Leone the labour force participation rate among females is 51.1% and among males is 55.6% for 2022 (World Bank, 2022). Most women that enter the labour workforce tend to apply for jobs such as house maids and catering that fit into the social perceptions about the feminine behaviour. Married women tend to fall into this category as it is expected that the husband will be responsible for the expenditures in the home, while the wife concerns herself with the children. The lack of financial autonomy is why women tend to be vulnerable to many risks such as poverty in the case of divorce or separation from their spouses. Although there have been laws such as the Registration of Customary Marriage and Divorce Act enacted to protect women against such vulnerabilities, the issue is still prevalent in the country (Mikell, 1997).

6.4 Sexual and Gender-Based Violence

According to the European Institute for Gender Equality 'Gender-based violence is violence directed against a person because of their gender.' The terms Gender-based violence and violence against women are often used interchangeably depending on the situation. The UN defines violence against women as, 'any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.' Gender-based violence can include sexual, physical, mental, and economic harm inflicted in public or in private. It also includes threats of violence, coercion, and manipulation. This can take many forms such as intimate partner violence, sexual violence, child marriage, female genital mutilation and so-called 'honour crimes' (United Nations High Commission for Refugees, 2019).

Women and young girls suffer from GBV more than any other demographic. In 2019, World Bank stated that '35% of women worldwide have experienced either physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence.' Gender-based violence was made prevalent during periods of conflict across various countries. According to the UN, conflict-related sexual violence refers to rape, sexual slavery, forced prostitution, forced pregnancy, forced abortion, enforced sterilisation, forced marriage and any other form of sexual violence of comparable gravity perpetrated against women, men, girls, or boys that is directly or indirectly linked to a conflict. The objectification and dehumanization of women have made it so that women are almost always the victims of gender-based violence. Rape does not only have psychological effects on women, it can also make them vulnerable to sexually transmitted diseases and infections, in some cases, unwanted pregnancies and even death. According to the U.S. National Sexual Violence Resource Centre, almost 2.9 million women have experienced a rape-related pregnancy in their lifetime.

Sierra Leone is one country where violence against women is widespread across all aspects of society. According to the latest data released by the Sierra Leone DHS in 2019, experiences of physical and sexual violence continue to be prevalent in the country —61 per cent of women aged 15–49 have experienced physical violence by anyone since the age 15; and this trend increased by 8 percent from 2013. Furthermore, when breaking down the age category specifically for women between the ages of 25 and 29, this percentage increases to 67 per cent. This practice, conceived from inconspicuous traditional societies, has a negative effect on girls and young women. It is done with the belief that it will prevent certain health issues such as vaginal infections and even reduce the sexual urge of young girls and women, thereby preventing teenage pregnancy and other sexual distractions they may face while ushering them into womanhood. This practice has no health benefits on girls and women, in fact, it has the opposite effect on female reproductive health. Such issues include chronic genital and urinary tract infections, reduced libido, haemorrhage (excessive bleeding), painful menstruation, development of scar tissue which results in the passing of keloids, and birth complications resulting in maternal and child mortality.

7. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study examines the various pathways of negative gender stereotyping on women in society and its effects. Relevant and up-to-date information concerning the topic was investigated to ensure that this research is empirical. Various methods and techniques were employed to gather data for the study for the very essence of guaranteeing that collected data are justifiable, explicit, and effective. In order to investigate the impact of negative gender stereotyping and the role of various relevant authorities in fighting against it in the country, a qualitative and quantitative methodology was employed, as detailed research planning was needed to produce precise findings regarding the impact of gender stereotypes against women. A quantitative methodology is a broad approach in social research aimed at understanding a particular social situation or event (Creswell 1994).

This study made use of both primary and secondary data to ensure that the evidence provided is empirical and explicit to all and sundry. This study made use of primary data which had to do with the collection of first-hand information from respondents within Freetown. Primary data are very instrumental as they give the researcher an insight into the topic under study which in turn can contribute immensely to ensuring that the study is empirical and explicit. Based on the study, the researcher used questionnaires in order to obtain relevant data from the respondents which was very interactive and educational.

The study incorporated secondary data, which has garnered increased interest due to the recognition that qualitative datasets often contain narratives relevant to primary research topics that have not been previously analyzed. Conducting secondary research can thus strengthen the foundational body of social knowledge while providing new social perspectives or conceptual focuses on original research issues.

Secondary data refers to information that has been previously collected and recorded by others, readily accessible from a variety of sources. In this study, secondary data were gathered from both published and unpublished materials, including academic journals, government reports, and NGO publications. This comprehensive approach offers a broader context for understanding the impact of negative gender stereotyping on women in Sierra Leone.

Integrating secondary data enhances the empirical foundation of the research, facilitating a comparison between new findings and existing literature. Furthermore, this approach allows the researcher to identify gaps in the current understanding of gender stereotypes and their effects, thereby contributing valuable insights to the field of gender studies.

8. SAMPLE SIZE AND SAMPLING TECHNIQUES

Twenty (20) respondents from the target population were interviewed to obtain justifiable information concerning the oppression of women through gender stereotypes. The exercise is only limited to the effects of negative gender stereotyping on women, therefore all evidence concerning this research will be more focused on Freetown, Sierra Leone. All 20 respondents were females between the age bracket (21–50) while the remaining Sampling may be defined as the collection of some parts of an aggregate or entirety based on which a judgement or inference about the aggregate or totality is made. In other words, it is the process of finding data about an entire population by examining only part of it. The approach is done to be able to generalise or to draw inferences based on samples about the parameters of the population from which the population is taken. In this research stratified sampling was done on the persons interviewed for the very essence of ensuring that first-hand information could be collected and scrutinised. It was done so that specific information would be collected from the generalised target population.

9. ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

In conducting this research on gender stereotypes in Freetown, ethical considerations such as informed consent, confidentiality, and data archiving were strictly adhered to in order to maintain the integrity of the study and protect the respondents.

Informed Consent

All participants in this study were fully informed about the purpose, nature, and potential implications of the research prior to their participation. They were provided with detailed information regarding their role in the study and were assured that their participation was voluntary. Written consent forms were distributed, ensuring that respondents understood they could withdraw from the research

at any point without any negative consequences. By signing the consent forms, participants agreed to participate in the research while acknowledging their rights throughout the data collection process.

Maintaining Confidentiality

Confidentiality was a top priority in this research. Personal identifiers, such as names, addresses, and any other information that could directly identify participants, were excluded from the final report to protect their privacy. Instead, codes and pseudonyms were used to refer to individual respondents. All data was securely stored in password-protected files, and only the research team had access to it. The handling of the data complied with international ethical standards for research, ensuring that all information was treated with the highest level of discretion and security.

Archiving Data

To ensure that the research findings remain accessible for future analysis while maintaining participants' privacy, all collected data will be archived securely. The data will be anonymized before archiving, ensuring that no personal details can be traced back to individual participants. The data will be stored for a specified period as per institutional guidelines, after which it will either be securely destroyed or retained in an anonymized format for future research purposes. During this time, the data will only be accessed for academic purposes, ensuring that the confidentiality and integrity of the respondents are continuously upheld.

10. RESEARCH FINDINGS

Women tend to bear the brunt of gender stereotypes and unearthing the root causes and shedding light on the research findings that illuminate the true extent of gender stereotype oppression, the research aim to challenge these ingrained norms and pave the way for a more equitable future. This research summarises the data collected through empirical research and discusses relevant findings on the pervasive influence of gender stereotypes on the lives of women.

10.1 Findings

The data analysed from respondent answers to the questions reveals that the majority of respondents (45%) believed that culture is the most common driving factor perpetuating gender stereotypes against women. Other socio-demographic factors such as marital status and education have also played significant roles in the stereotyping of women with 50% of respondents being married and 20% being unemployed. Most of the respondents (35%) reported discrimination to be their first experience with being stereotyped. It is found to be one of the most common forms of negative stereotyping of women in the country. Lack of proper education was the second most reported as 30% of respondents' first experience.

Gender stereotypes have influences on various facets of life; 65% of the respondents believed that it influences communication patterns in family dynamics and relationships, and all respondents (100%) strongly agreed that negatively gender stereotyping women is an obstacle to women's career advancement in society. It also has a great influence on income inequality between men and women according to 85% of respondents, which results in hesitation in disclosing their socioeconomic background. Negative gender stereotypes have been known to have serious effects on women's psychological well-being. Most of the respondents reported low self-esteem (25%) and self-doubt (20%) as the most common psychological effect. The most common strategies respondents reported in coping with being stereotyped are prayer (50%) and receiving support from others (25%). The researcher noted this information as interesting as 30% of respondents believed religion to be the most significant contributor to gender stereotyping of women.

All respondents had prior knowledge of the existing strategies responsible for combating gender stereotypes against women, with a notable number (45%) having knowledge through awareness campaigns.

10.2 Secondary Data Findings

Literature indicates that gender stereotypes in Sierra Leone are deeply entrenched and multifaceted, often manifesting in societal expectations that reinforce women's roles as caregivers and homemakers (Morris, 2014; Kaba, 2015). Research also highlights the intersectionality of these stereotypes, affecting women from different backgrounds, such as those with disabilities or from lower socioeconomic statuses (OHCHR, 2020).

Secondary data confirms that traditional beliefs and religious doctrines significantly contribute to gender stereotyping. Studies point to the impact of societal structures that perpetuate male dominance and female subservience, as seen in the treatment of women under various cultural and religious frameworks (CEDAW, State of Party Report, 2012; Kaba, 2015). The historical context of the civil war further exacerbates these issues, reinforcing male-centric views (Human Rights Watch, 2003).

Literature consistently underscores the negative implications of gender stereotyping, including educational inequalities, health disparities, financial insecurity, and increased vulnerability to gender-based violence (World Bank Group, 2021; United Nations, 2020). Statistical data corroborate the claims of high illiteracy rates among women and their limited access to quality healthcare and well-paying jobs.

Literature suggests broader systemic interventions, such as policy reforms aimed at improving women's access to education and healthcare, enforcing laws against gender-based violence, and promoting gender equality in the workplace (Mikell, 1997; United Nations, 2020).

11. DISCUSSION AND INTERPRETATION

The literature confirms that gender stereotypes are heavily rooted in societal expectations that position women primarily as caregivers and homemakers (Morris, 2014; Kaba, 2015). This is consistent with the primary data findings from respondents which indicates that cultural norms and values are seen as the most significant drivers perpetuating gender stereotypes against women, with 45% of respondents identifying culture as the main factor. This finding highlights the pervasive influence of entrenched cultural beliefs and practices that continue to shape gender roles in Sierra Leone. It is crucial to recognize that cultural constructs often dictate the expected behaviors of women, assigning them to subordinate roles and perpetuating a cycle of marginalization. This cultural adherence is deeply ingrained and passed through generations, making it difficult to dismantle gender biases. The fact that 50% of the respondents were married also sheds light on the intersectionality between marital status and gender stereotyping. In many cases, marriage solidifies traditional gender roles, where women are expected to fulfill domestic duties, thus reinforcing the perception of women as caregivers rather than active participants in the labor force.

The secondary data also underscores the intersectionality of gender stereotyping, particularly its impact on women from vulnerable groups, such as those with disabilities or from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (OHCHR, 2020). Additionally, the finding that 20% of respondents were unemployed points to the broader socio-economic context that fuels gender stereotypes. Unemployment among women not only perpetuates the stereotype of women being less capable of economic participation but also contributes to their economic dependence, reinforcing patriarchal structures. The interaction between education and employment is critical in understanding how gender stereotypes operate. Lack of access to quality education for women continues to limit their employment opportunities, confining them to roles that are socially deemed 'appropriate' for women.

Discrimination, as reported by 35% of respondents, was the first experience of being stereotyped for most participants. This finding is significant as it reveals that gender discrimination remains one of the most pervasive forms of negative stereotyping in the country. Discrimination is likely institutionalized, occurring in workplaces, social spaces, and even within family dynamics. The frequency of discrimination being reported as a first encounter with stereotyping indicates that these biases are not merely personal but are rooted in structural inequality that upholds gender norms.

The literature consistently points to the detrimental impact of gender stereotypes on women's access to education and economic security (World Bank Group, 2021; United Nations, 2020). Lack of education, reported by 30% of respondents, also emerges as a major contributing factor to gender stereotyping. This suggests that educational disparity not only limits opportunities for women but also entrenches gendered thinking that portrays women as less competent or capable. Education, particularly for women, is a key tool in challenging and dismantling harmful stereotypes. However, the data reveals that many women's first experiences with stereotyping occur in educational settings or due to their level of education, suggesting that systemic reform is needed to address these institutional biases.

The influence of gender stereotypes extends into various aspects of life, as evidenced by 65% of respondents who believe that stereotypes affect communication patterns within family dynamics. Gender roles often dictate how individuals communicate, with women frequently being expected to adopt a passive or nurturing role. This dynamic reinforces unequal power relations within households and can hinder women from asserting themselves in both personal and professional spaces.

Furthermore, the unanimous agreement (100%) that negative gender stereotyping poses a barrier to women's career advancement reflects the deeply ingrained challenges women face in professional settings. Gender stereotypes can limit women's access to leadership roles, perpetuating the glass ceiling effect where women find it difficult to ascend to higher positions due to preconceived notions of their abilities. This barrier is further compounded by the 85% of respondents who reported that income inequality is a direct result of gender stereotypes. This finding underscores the structural nature of economic discrimination, where women are often paid less than their male counterparts for the same work or are relegated to lower-paying jobs due to assumptions about their competence.

The psychological toll of gender stereotyping on women is another critical issue highlighted by the data. A considerable proportion of respondents reported suffering from low self-esteem (25%) and self-doubt (20%), illustrating the profound emotional and mental health impact that gender stereotyping can have on women. The internalization of negative stereotypes can diminish a woman's sense of self-worth, leading to long-term psychological consequences. The pervasive nature of these effects points to the need for interventions that address both the external and internal dimensions of gender stereotyping.

This cultural adherence is often reinforced by religious doctrines, as highlighted in secondary data. Studies indicate that religious frameworks play a significant role in sustaining male dominance and female subservience (CEDAW, State of Party Report, 2012; Kaba, 2015). From the primary findings, the strategies that women employ to cope with these stereotypes are varied. Prayer, cited by 50% of respondents, reflects the role of religion in shaping personal coping mechanisms. This is particularly notable given that 30% of respondents also identified religion as a significant contributor to gender stereotyping, suggesting a complex relationship

between faith and gender roles. While religion can provide solace and strength, it can also reinforce traditional gender norms that perpetuate inequality. Meanwhile, receiving support from others (25%) underscores the importance of social networks in helping women navigate the challenges posed by gender stereotypes. Support from family, friends, and community members can play a vital role in mitigating the psychological and emotional impacts of discrimination.

Interestingly, the data reveals that all respondents had prior knowledge of existing strategies aimed at combating gender stereotypes, with 45% gaining this knowledge through awareness campaigns. This demonstrates the effectiveness of educational and advocacy programs in raising awareness about the harms of gender stereotypes. However, the fact that awareness exists does not necessarily translate to action or change. It suggests that while knowledge of the issue is widespread, there may still be gaps in implementing practical solutions to combat these stereotypes at both the societal and institutional levels.

In conclusion, the findings from the respondents reveal the multi-dimensional nature of gender stereotyping in Sierra Leone, where cultural, social, and economic factors intersect to perpetuate inequality. Addressing these stereotypes requires a holistic approach that not only focuses on awareness and education but also challenges the structural systems that uphold gender-based discrimination. Effective solutions must consider the psychological, social, and economic dimensions of gender stereotyping to create a more equitable society.

12. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the research on gender stereotypes against women in the Regent Road community has unearthed a complex and deeply ingrained issue that warrants urgent attention and action. Gender stereotypes have posed a massive threat to women's freedom and development, from unrealistic beauty standards to unreasonable domestic demands. These stereotypes manifest in various forms, from limiting educational and career opportunities to perpetuating unorthodox cultural norms that constrain women's agency and self-determination. The research has revealed that these stereotypes are not only perpetuated by societal expectations but are also reinforced by systemic inequalities and traditional legacies. The women stressed the pressures of societal expectations and its link to a patriarchal culture, resulting in the internalization of negative attitudes and behaviours. It also brings to the attention that negatively stereotyping women causes them to have less financial independence, making them vulnerable in the decision-making process within relationships. They disclosed that it has hindered effective communication and respectful dialogue, aggravating conflict situations.

13. RECOMMENDATIONS

For the Government of Sierra Leone

- **Education**
Encourage various and diverse role models in the education sector as well as materials and develop inclusive and gender-sensitive curricula in basic, senior secondary and tertiary institutions.
- **Legal Framework**
Institute effective measures such as reforming and enforcing existing anti-discrimination laws such as the CEDAW and implement policies for equal pay and opportunity for women.
- **Engage Civil Society**
Prioritize the creation of partnerships and collaborate with NGOs and women's organisations along with seeking input from experts and activists.
- **Strengthen and Sensitise Law Enforcement**
Proactive measures must be taken to ensure a responsive system for reporting and addressing gender-based crimes as well as training law enforcement on gender sensitivity.
- **Support Services**
Establish and improve support networks for victims of gender-based violence, counselling, and mental health services in order to improve the psychological well-being of women.
- **Research and Data Collection**
Efforts must be made to invest in extensive research to improve knowledge on the impact of gender stereotypes on women and track the progress made in mitigating them.

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